

Marry, be damned

What have The Merry Wives Of Windsor and Ibsen's Little Eyolf got in common? Not a lot, thought **Michael Billington**, until he saw the RSC's two latest productions

The revelation

IBSEN and Shakespeare: unquestionably the greatest of all dramatists. And the RSC fortuitously links them with a double Stratford opening of Little Eyolf at The Swan and The Merry Wives Of Windsor at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre: two plays dealing from wildly differing perspectives, with marriage, jealousy and guilt.

Little Eyolf, written late in Ibsen's life in 1894, is a particularly tough nut: one that Adrian Noble's masterly production cracks with great aplomb. What he grasps is that this sombre, brooding play is essentially about the painful process of resurrection: that only by facing the darkest, bitterest truths about ourselves can we hope to achieve spiritual renewal.

As in *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf*, a child — in this case indisputably real — is the means of exposing marital guilt. The impotent idealist, Alfred Allmers, and the fiercely sensual Rita have never recovered from the fact that their son was crippled through their own negligence: as a baby he fell off a table while they were making love.

And when, later, the nine-year-old Eyolf is lured into the sea by the Red Wife and drowns, Alfred and Rita are forced into a process of almost Strindbergian soul-stripping. Alfred confronts his passion for his presumed half-sister, Asta; Rita her own devouring jealousy. Both also acknowledge that, for all their protestations, "We never really loved Eyolf."

That line is greeted in Noble's production by a ruefully ironic laugh from Joanne Pearce's Rita and Robert Glenister's Alfred. It becomes the pivotal moment in the production suggesting the self-examination that leads ultimately to tentative renewal. "Know thyself!" said the ancients; and Ibsen's point is that only after one has dissected one's own life-lies can one hope to change either oneself or the world. It is a play about learning and, since it is the heroine who finally proposes to open up the house to the village's impoverished children, it could even be retitled *Educating Rita*.

Noble, whose earlier productions of *A Doll's House* and *The Master Builder* revealed an extraordinary understanding of Ibsen, also gets the point here: that the play is dominated by what Ibsen calls "the law of change". Joanne Pearce's superb Rita moves from a tigerish sexual jealousy through a frantic death-wish towards a form of spiritual rebirth: she is unforgettable in the last act as, with a ghostly pallor, she removes a series of stones from her capacious overcoat pockets as if she planned to mimic her son's watery death before deciding to accept the role of surrogate village mother.

Robert Glenister also registers Alfred's transition from self-deceiving idealist to earthbound realist with nery intensity. And there is impeccable support from Derbhle Crotty as the angst-ridden Asta and from Damian Lewis as the practical engineer who offers her the only hope of rational escape. Rob Howell's set, with a fault-line symbolically running through the floor, also suffers internal erosion with each act, as if the characters are reduced to living on the edge of a precipice; which in this vertiginous masterpiece they virtually are.

After the shattering emotional intensity of the tormented souls of Norway, *The Merry Wives Of Windsor* seems quite relaxing. But Ian Judge, as if to belie his reputation as the RSC's Dr Pangloss, comes up an autumnal, ruse-hued production in which the fun is somewhat fitful.

Indeed, he even gives an Ibsenite twist to the climax of the scene where the maniacally jealous Ford ransacks his house in search of his wife's assumed lover. As Edward Petherbridge's crestfallen, obsessive Ford urges his wife to go and make dinner, Susannah York's hitherto sunny, bright-eyed Alice stalks off for all the world as if she is about the slam the door like Nora in *A Doll's House*. It's so startling a moment that one wishes the idea of a marriage founded on suspicion and mistrust had been allowed to shadow the rest of the comedy.

The chief problem with this production is Leslie Phillips's seedy, saloon-bar lecher of a Falstaff. He lacks weight, which undercuts the whole joke of his being bundled into a duc's basket; even more sig-



Guilt edged... Joanne Pearce and Robert Glenister in *Little Eyolf*

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nificantly he lacks any aura of depleted aristocracy so that his final exclusion from this snugs, middle-class Eden goes for little. But there is a priceless supporting performance from Guy Henry as Dr Caius which goes beyond the

Europohic, funny-foreigner joke to present us with a man of insatiable curiosity about the language that he so constantly mishandles. He is the brightest feature of a goddiah production that intriguingly hints at the Ibsenite nature of

Windsor marriages but that lacks a Falstaff of the right spiritual, as well as physical, fitness: after *Little Eyolf*, one craves a Big Jack. Little Eyolf and *The Merry Wives Of Windsor* are in rep at Stratford (01789-295623).

Billington Guardian Eyolf



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